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ABSTRACT

In order to investigate whether cultural differences appear in children's desire for material objects, three wishes expressed by each of 44 Mexican-American and 46 non-Hispanic kindergarten children were solicited and used as indices of children's materialistic preferences. "Materialistic wishes" were defined as those that expressed personal desire to possess tangible objects, activities, and inclusive materials (such as money). It was found that out of the six subcategories of materialistic wishes (toys, pets, equipment, vehicles, houses, and inclusive materials), toys and pets were the most frequently mentioned by children, regardless of race and sex. In terms of racial differences, Mexican-American children appeared to wish for toys more often than for pets, whereas non-Hispanic children tended to prefer pets and other material objects to toys. It is therefore suggested that social and cultural background is related to the wish-making behavior of young children. (Author/MP)

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Wishes of White and Mexican American Kindergarten Children: An Index of Materialistic Preferences

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Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southwest Educational Research Association, Houston, January 27-29, 1983.

Abstract

Three wishes of 90 kindergarten children, 44 Mexican Americans and 46 whites, were solicited and used as indices of children's materialistic preferences. It was found that toys and pets were the most popular objects mentioned by these young children, regardless of race and sex. In terms of racial difference, Mexican American children appeared to wish for toys more often than for pets and other material objects; whereas, white children tended to prefer pets and other material objects to toys. These distribution differences were further supported by the tests of independence. Therefore, the present study suggests that social cultural background is related to the wish making behavior of young children.

Wishes of White and Mexican American Kindergarten Children: An Index of Materialistic Preferences

The content of children's wish has been considered as meaningful data, both psychologically and educationally. It is generally assumed that wishes express goals and values (Karnes & Wherry, 1981), indicate levels of aspiration and areas of dissatisfaction (Cobb, 1954), reflect personal desires and needs (Guarnaccia & Vane, 1979), project personal interests and concerns (Jersild, Markey, & Jersild, 1933), and mirror the problem of adjustment and attitudes toward reality (Goodenough, 1925). Based on such assumptions, asking children what they would wish for if they had three wishes is a common projective technique used in psychological evaluation of children, and several systematic researches about children's wishes have been conducted.

As early as 1925, Goodenough (1925) analyzed the wishes of children, who were referred to a clinic for behavioral difficulties. She found that anxieties, feelings of inferiority, and attitudes toward reality and social activities all appeared in children's wishes. These findings led Goodenough to conclude that data elicited from children's wishes could be valuable in the analysis of the causes of behavioral problems. Because the subjects whose mental ages were nine years or below generally expressed materialistic wishes for pets, toys, candies, and the like, Goodenough further suggested that the most significant age range for such projective technique was the early adolescent or preadolescent period.

Subsequent studies followed Goodenough's suggestion and usually

focused on examining the wishes of preadolescents and adolescents (Brook & Gordon, 1979; Vandewiele, 1981). This tendency, however, was not an overwhelming one; Boynton (1936) and Gray (1944) had included 6-year-old subjects in their studies. While both researchers also indicated that younger children were very materialistically oriented (wishes for material objects accounted for more than 90% of the total wishes), they did not agree with one another on the most popular material objects wished for by their subjects. Boynton's (1936) sample was a group of white children. His study revealed that toys were the most popular objects mentioned by 6-year-old boys, and dolls were the most popular objects wished for by 6-year-old girls. Gray (1944) replicated Boynton's study with black subjects and reported that automobiles were the most popular objects asked for by both black boys and girls. These two studies suggest that social cultural background may have an influence on children's wishes for different material objects.

Recently, Chiu and Nevius (note 1) pointed out that while wishes for material things may seem to be trivial, they correspond to children's levels of cognitive development. For example, kindergarten children are cognitively limited not only in their temporal time sapn but also in the scope of their concerns, therefore, they will be more likely to wish for a tangible or concrete object rather than for an intangible or abstract states of being. Since wishes reflect personal desires (Guarnaccia & Vane, 1979), the thing mentioned by children must be relatively high in their hierarchies of preference. Thus, the high percentage of materialistic wishes made by young children may suitably be treated as indices of children's material object preferences. Based on these

priditions, the present research focused on investigating materialistic wishes of white and Mexican American kindergarten children and asked: "Does cultural difference appear in children's expressed wishes for material preferences?"

Method

Subjects

The sample consisted of 90 children, 44 boys and 46 girls. Subjects were enrolled in eight mixed races public kindergartens of west Texas. There were 44 Mexican Amercan children, 21 boys and 23 girls, and 46 white children, 23 boys and 23 girls. The age range of the sample was 5.0 to 6.6 years old (mean = 6.1, sd = 0.35), in which Mexican American children ranged from 5.0 to 6.6 (mean = 6.0, sd = .40) and white children ranged from 5.5 to 6.6 (mean = 6.1, sd = .30). Most of the subjects in both groups were rated by their teachers as middle class children.

Procedure

The wishes of kindergarten children were obtained by their teachers in an individual interview situation. The teachers were instructed to collect the data by the following procedures: (1) The teacher brought the subject to a quiet place and said to him/her "Let's play a game." "If I gave you three wishes, any three wishes in the whole world, what would you wish for?" This question was repeated if necessary. (2) After this question was asked, the teacher wrote down every word the child said and allowed as much time as possible for the child to respond. (3) When

the first wish was stated, the teacher asked "What is your next wish?" (4) After all three wishes were collected, the teacher repeated each wish and asked "Tell me why you wished for...." For example, "Peter, you asked for a car, tell me why you wished to have a car." (5) When the data of the three wishes and reasons for the wishes were collected, the teacher asked "If all of your three wishes could come true, which wish would you like to happen first, which one second, and which one third?" The teacher would repeat the wishes for the child if necessary.

Categories of Wishes

Following Chiu and Nevius (Note 1), the wish categories used in the present study were:

(I) Materialistic Wishes: Wishes that express personal desire to have or to possess tangible objects, activities, and inclusive materials.

The six subcategories of materialistic wishes were:

(1) Toys.

(2) Pets--pets and animals.

(3) Equipment--sporting goods, stationary, dresses, and the like.

(4) Vehicles--cars, bicycles, motor boats, airplanes, and so on.

(5) Houses--houses, rooms, furnitures and fixtures, farms, and so on.

(6) Inclusive materials--money, riches, travels, parties, and so on.

(II) Altruistic Wishes: Wishes that express concerns for other people, for society, and for humankind as a whole.

(III) Personal wishes: Wishes that express personal desires or needs for intangible and abstract things, such as happiness, change of personal physical or psychological characteristics, improvement of personal social

relations, and the like.

(IV) Goal Wishes: Wishes that reflect personal goals and aspirations for educational or vocational careers, or that express needs for opportunities to accomplish something.

Treatment of Data

Each wish was categorized into either one of the six materialistic or one of the three nonmaterialistic wish categories. The rater read both content and reason to decide the central idea of the wish. For example, a wish for "a car" with the reason "to play" was categorized as a toy, but with the reason "to take me places" was categorized as a vehicle. Both frequency and percentage of each wish category were calculated for the total and primary wishes. One-sample chi-square values were computed to determine the nature of the distribution for primary materialistic wishes. Chi-square test for independence was employed to detect the difference between races and sexes.

Results

Table 1 presents race by sex by category frequencies and their corresponding percentages for the total as well as primary wishes.

Insert table 1 about here

As the data shows, near 90% of the total wishes for both racial groups were materialistically oriented. For white children, girls made

more materialistic wishes (94%) than boys (84%); whereas, for Mexican American children, boys made more materialistic wishes (94%) than girls (94%). This tendency held true for the primary wishes too.

In terms of material preferences, toys (44%) were the most popular material objects wished for by Mexican American children, and pets (20%) were second. In reverse, white children mentioned pets (33%) most frequently and then toys (20%). This preference tendency was even stronger for the primary wishes; 52% toys and 20% pets for Mexican American children, and 37% pets and 15% toys for white children.

Because toys and pets appeared to be the most dominant material objects wished for by kindergarten children, the other four materialistic subcategories were combined for statistical analysis. As indicated previously that one-sample chi-square test and chi-square test of independence were the chosen statistics of measurement, for which a basic assumption is that each observation must be independent of each other, and therefore, one may not make several observations on the same person and count each as independent (Siegel, 1956). Consequently, the analyses were performed only for the primary materialistic wishes.

The computed one-sample chi-square values for both racial groups showed that the wish distribution of Mexican American children deviated significantly from random expectation ($X^2 = 10.55$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$), in which toys were wished for more often than pets and other material objects. Further analyses, by computing chi-square values for each sex, revealed that this distribution deviation only applied to Mexican American boys ($X^2 = 15.69$, $p < .001$), but not girls. Thus, the finding for the Mexican American group as a whole was dependent largely upon the

wish patterns of boys. In contrast, a marginal significant distribution deviation was found in the wishes of white children ($X^2 = 5.77$, $p < .06$); pets and the combination of other material objects were wished for more often than toys.

Chi-square tests for independence were conducted by analyzing three by two (three categories by two races and three categories by two sexes) contingency tables. When two racial groups were compared, the data indicated a significant difference ($X^2 = 15.24$, $p < .001$); white kindergarten children more often wished for pets and the combination of other material objects, and less often wished for toys than their Mexican American peers. Further analyses, by comparing the same sex between races, showed a significant difference between boys ($X^2 = 17.55$, $p < .001$), but not girls. Therefore, the significant material object preference found between two racial groups was dependent mainly upon the difference between white and Mexican American boys. The result of sex by category analysis showed that no significant sex difference existed in the group as a whole, nor within each group.

Discussion

The results of this study appear to support the present researchers' hypothesis that cultural difference has an influence on children's material preferences. Looking at the group as a whole, toys and pets were the most popular material objects mentioned by kindergarden children, regardless of sex and race. In a cognitive developmental perspective, wishes for toys and pets are sharp contrast to wishes for

inclusive materials and abstract desires. The former ones may be viewed as representives of the concreteness and limited concern of young children. Moreover, children's strong interests in toys and pets, as revealed from their wishes, may imply that the ideas that learning by manipulating toys and by observing or playing with pets are especially suitable in early childhood education settings.

In terms of wish distribution among material contents, the results revealed that Mexican American children tended to wish for toys more often than for pets and other material objects; whereas, white children appeared to prefer pets and other material objects to toys. This within group distribution deviation constituted the major difference between wishes of white and Mexican American children. However, it should be noted that the evidence for this difference was dependent largely upon the findings for boys. White and Mexican American girls were more alike than different in their wishes for material objects.

The tendency that white children as a whole made more wishes for pets than did Mexican American children is very intriguing, because in a study of black children, aged seven to 12, Kokonis (1974) also reported that his black sample made significantly fewer wishes for pets than did Ables's (1972) 7- to 12-year-old white subjects. A speculation proposed by Kokonis was that pets might be a status symbol and therefore they might not characterize the wishes of his black lower socioeconomic class children. This explanation of socioeconomic influence, however, does not apply to the present study, which sampled middle class white and Mexican American children. While the present study was descriptive in nature and could not explain why pets were more often wished for by whites than by

Mexican Americans, a tentative speculation might be that wishes for pets might represent children's needs for companionship or emotional attachment and as such they might not characterize the concerns of Mexican and black American children, who are traditionally raised in larger family, and have more siblings than white children. The next logical step in future research will be to include such variables as family size, number of siblings, and birth order to help substantiate the above speculation.

In view of research methodology, the present study not only asked children to express three wishes but also reasons of their wishes. As the example provided in data treatment section, reason along wish content would clearify the central idea of the wish, especially for the wishes of younger children. Moreover, from the reasons of children's wishes, we found that the reasoning patterns of our sample were based predominantly on the purposes, functions, and characteristics of the objects that they wished for. For example, the wish for a dog was often associated with the reason "a watch dog," or the wish for a pencil was associated "to draw with." It is suggested that asking children why they wish for something may provide information for investigators interested in children's reasoning processes.

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1. Chiu, J. P., & Nevius, J. R. The Wishes of Five- and Seven-Year-Old Children: An Index of Materialistic Preferences. Manuscript submitted for publication, 1982.

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Table 1

Race by Sex by Category Frequencies and Percentages

for the Total and Primary Wishes *

Wish Category	Total Wishes						Primary Wishes					
	White			Mexican			White			Mexican		
Sex:	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
Toys	12	15	27	25	58	85	2	5	7	15	8	23
	17%	22%	20%	52%	36%	44%	9%	22%	15%	71%	35%	52%
Pets	18	28	46	10	17	27	8	9	17	3	6	9
	26%	41%	33%	16%	25%	20%	35%	39%	37%	14%	26%	20%
Equipment	11	11	22	5	9	14	3	3	6	0	2	2
	16%	16%	16%	8%	13%	11%	13%	13%	13%	0	9%	5%
Vehicles	11	2	13	6	2	8	4	1	5	2	1	3
	16%	3%	9%	9%	3%	6%	17%	4%	11%	10%	4%	7%
Houses	2	3	5	2	2	4	2	2	4	0	2	2
	3%	4%	4%	3%	3%	3%	9%	9%	9%	0	9%	5%
Inclusive Materials	4	6	10	3	3	6	1	3	4	0	1	1
	6%	9%	7%	5%	4%	5%	4%	13%	9%	0	4%	2%
Total of Materialistic Wishes	58	65	123	59	58	117	20	23	43	20	20	40
	84%	94%	89%	94%	84%	89%	87%	100%	93%	95%	87%	91%
Altruistic	2	1	3	1	4	5	0	0	0	0	1	1
	3%	1%	2%	2%	6%	4%	0	0	0	0	4%	2%
Personal	9	2	11	1	7	8	3	0	3	0	2	2
	13%	3%	8%	2%	10%	6%	13%	0	7%	0	9%	5%
Goal	0	1	1	2	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	1
	0	1%	1%	3%	0	1%	0	0	0	5%	0	2%
Total	69	69	138	63	69	132	23	23	46	21	23	44

* M = Male, F = Female, T = Total